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Why Break Windows?

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From the initial revolt in Ferguson last August to the demonstrations in Oakland and Berkeley last week, property destruction has been central to a new wave of struggle against police violence. But what does vandalizing businesses have to do with protesting police brutality? Why break windows?

First, as countless others have argued, because property destruction is an effective tactic. From the Boston Tea Party to the demonstrations against the 1999 World Trade Organization summit in Seattle, property destruction has been an essential part of many struggles. It can pressure or punish opponents by inflicting an economic cost. It can mobilize potential comrades by demonstrating that the ruling forces are not invincible. It can force issues that otherwise would be suppressed—we would certainly not be having a nationwide conversation about race, class, and policing were it not for the courageous actions of a few vandals in Ferguson. Finally, it conveys an uncompromising rejection of the prevailing order, opening space in which people may begin to imagine another.

Property destruction charges don't look good on a résumé or in a campaign for city council, but perhaps this is a good thing. It means that political vandalism is usually a selfless act—and even when it isn't, it has to be its own reward. There is more reason to suspect paid nonprofit activists and aspiring politicians of ulterior motives than to question the motivations of vandals. This may explain why activists and politicians cast such aspersions on them.

Shop windows represent segregation. They are invisible barriers. Like so much in this society, they simultaneously offer a view of “the good life” and block access to it. In a polarizing economy, shop windows taunt the poor with commodities they cannot afford, status and security they will never attain. For millions upon millions, the healthy food, medicines, and other goods they need are the breadth of an entire social class away from them, a gulf they will not cross in a lifetime of hard work—a gulf represented by half an inch of plate glass.

To smash a shop window is to contest all the boundaries that cut through this society: black and white, rich and poor, included and excluded. Most of us have become inured to all this segregation, taking such inequalities for granted as a fact of life. Breaking windows is a way to break this silence, to challenge the absurd notion that the social construct of property rights is more important than the needs of the people around us.

One reactionary argument goes that vandals are wrecking “their own neighborhoods,” but this is a disingenuous way to speak about those whose names do not appear on any deeds. Indeed, when developers speak of “improving” these neighborhoods, they mean the de facto expulsion of the current population. The problem in Ferguson and everywhere like it is not that the economy has been interrupted; the problem is the routine functioning of the economy itself. In a profit-driven society, the more that poor people work and pay rent, the poorer they will end up relative to those who are profiting on their labor—that’s where profit comes from. It is dishonest to blame the victim here, as if more submissiveness could produce a different result. In a pyramid scheme, somebody has to form the bottom tier, and ever since the colonization of the so-called Americas that has always meant black and brown people.

As others have pointed out, colonization, gentrification, mass incarceration, and police killings are all forms of displacement, of erasure. We have become accustomed to ceaseless, dramatic disruptions of the environments we live in—so long as it is capitalists and police driving them, not poor people. This normalizes an alienated relation to the urban landscape, so whole neighborhoods can be leveled and replaced without anyone batting an eyelid. It normalizes a social system that itself has only been imposed on the earth over the past couple centuries, making the most unsustainable way of life ever practiced seem timeless and eternal. Vandalism demonstrates that both the current disposition of urban space and the social system that determines it are contingent and temporary—that it is possible, even with limited resources, to transform space ac-

ording to a different logic. Gentrification and vandalism are both forms of intervention in the urban landscape—the difference is that gentrification is top-down, while vandalism is bottom-up.

It is not a coincidence that shop windows have been targeted in protests against police violence. Businesses, be they multinational or local, are the tax base that pays for police, and without police they would not be able to accumulate so much wealth at everyone else's expense. In this situation, addressing protests directly to the police is oblique, for the police answer to business owners and politicians, not to public opinion. It is much more direct to target their bosses, the capitalists themselves. Cost them enough money in smashed windows, and maybe they'll think twice about what kind of policing they call for.

“But some poor worker is going to have to clean that up,” sanctimonious liberals charge whenever they see a protester making free with the avenues of the wealthy. Anyone who has worked a blue-collar job knows that this is pure bunk. Replacing windows or scrubbing graffiti off a façade is no worse than any other kind of work one can get in that pay bracket—it's not as though the workers in question would be doing something pleasant and fulfilling otherwise. If anything, vandalism creates jobs, offering additional work opportunities to service industry employees and construction workers whose labor would not otherwise be required. This means you can't smash capitalism one storefront at a time—but trying to might at least redistribute a little wealth downward. It is typically liberal for critics to present the poor as the victims of confrontational tactics, when in fact it is their own status and comfort they fear for.

In the more paranoid version of this perspective, liberals who assume that everyone else must be as satisfied with the prevailing order as they are declare that only the police themselves, in disguise of course, would have smashed the windows they are tasked with protecting. Like other conspiracy theories, this attributes all agency to a single nefarious power, denying the existence and strategic sense of those who take action against it.

All this is not to argue that window-smashing is itself enough to change the world. In the final analysis, sabotage and arson are the strategy of a retreating army—of those who know they will not hold a given terrain for long. A movement strong enough to retain the territory it seizes from the police wouldn't need to break or burn anything, only to transform it. On the other hand, as long as such inequalities persist, people are bound to lash out against them via property destruction as well as other tactics. Anyone who truly desires to see an end to property destruction should hasten to bring about the end of property itself. Then, at last, the only reason to break windows would be thrill seeking.

Further Reading

A Beginner's Guide to Targeted Property Destruction

<http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2012/05/02/why-a>

In Defense of Rioting

<http://time.com/3605606/ferguson-in-defense-of-rioting/>

In Defense of Looting

<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/in-defense-of-looting/>

In Defense of the Ferguson Riots

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/08/in-defense-of-the-ferguson-riots/>

The Illegitimacy of Violence, the Violence of Legitimacy

<http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/violence.php>